

## Mary Had a Little Lamb

Emmanuel – Part II

Luke 2:6-7

### Introduction

When the prophet Malachi put away his quill and finished, what we know to be, the last Old Testament book of the Bible, it would be the last word heard from God for the next four hundred years. Between the last verse of Malachi and the first verse of Matthew, God did not speak; the heavens were silent.

Those years are known as, “the four hundred years of silence”. During that time, there was no prophet, no revelation, no angelic messenger, no sign, no miracle, no fire from heaven, no word from God. It was such a bleak time in Israel’s history that it was also called, “the dark period”.

Plato, who lived several hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, one day lamented, “Maybe one day, a logos [an explanation, a word] will come from God.”

In other words, “Maybe one day God will speak to mankind.”

The apostle John wrote of Christ’s coming to earth by saying, in chapter 1, verses 1 and 14a,

*In the beginning was the Word [logos], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt [pitched His tent] among us . . .*

Jesus Christ shattered the silence of the heavens. In a matter of hours, God’s angelic advertising agency would light up the once silent skies and deliver the unbelievable news that the Word from God had come. The explanation from God had arrived, in a most unexplainable way.

I invite you back to our study, in Luke’s gospel, of the details surrounding the delivery and announcement of the living Word from God.

### Jesus – The Word From God

Turn to Luke, chapter 2, and look at verse 1a.

*Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, . . .*

You may remember, from our last discussion, that this was the first Caesar to claim the title “Augustus,” which meant, “holy one”. It was a name that had only been used in reference to the gods of Rome, but was now attributed to him. It would be this Caesar Augustus who would begin the veneration of Caesar, which would lead to worship. It would also lead to, for the Christians, great persecution, as they would not acknowledge him, but rather Jesus Christ, as the only true and living Son of God. Continue to verses 1b through 5.

*. . . that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.*

Mary and Joseph were the scandal of Nazareth. These two Jewish young people, who were betrothed, had evidently violated their vows of purity before

their betrothal period, or “kidusheem,” was fulfilled. She was with child, the text announced!

Mary was, in fact, nine months pregnant when she and Joseph left for Bethlehem. As a result, they left their reputation behind.

The accusation of Jesus Christ’s illegitimacy would never be lived down. Thirty years later, when Christ was involved in declaring Himself to be the Messiah, the Jewish leaders scoffed at Him and said, according to John, chapter 8, verse 41,

... *“We were not born in fornication . . .”*

In other words, “We were not born out of wedlock like you were.”

Based on the traditional age of betrothal, Joseph was probably sixteen or seventeen years old. Mary was younger; perhaps as young as fourteen or fifteen.

## **Mary and Joseph – Trust in the Word of God**

I have been struck once again, with the deep character and trust of both of these teenagers. They had complete trust in the Word of God. This trust would help them overcome several major obstacles. Let me give them to you.

### **Unfair indictment**

1. I have already mentioned the first one and that was the unfair indictment or the pain of accusation.

### **Unexpected inconvenience**

2. The second one was unexpected inconvenience.

If you put the gospel accounts together, you discover that Joseph was spoken to four different times by God. After each revelation, Joseph was compelled to change something.

The first time he had to change his plans to put Mary away. That was the only thing he could do to rescue his reputation.

Over the course of their early marriage, Joseph was told to relocate three times. The first two years of Jesus’ life, Joseph led his family, as they escaped for their lives, to locations that God, through revelation, let him know where to run to next.

Three times he had to reestablish his trade as a carpenter. Three times he had to relocate his family

and set up a new home. And, he did this three times in less than three years.

Verse 3, that we just read, begins their story with them on the road. They were pregnant, poor, isolated, and misunderstood. They would not feel at home anywhere for several years.

The plan of God would forever change their lives. The will of God for Joseph and Mary, would be terribly inconvenient. It would end any dream of a normal life. The will of God for them, would rule out a comfortable life and would lead, many times, to total exhaustion.

If you ask the average Christian, “How do you know if you’re in the will of God?”

They will answer, “When I understand the things that are happening.”

If you had asked Joseph that question, he would have said, “When nothing seems to make any sense.”

If you ask the average Christian, “How do you know if God is at work in your life?”

They will say something like, “When things are improving and progressing; when everything is working out like I’d planned.”

If you had asked Joseph and Mary the same question, they would have said, “When nothing gets better; when everything we ever thought would happen and everything we planned to happen has been turned upside down.”

Have you ever heard a Christian say, “God is so good to me . . . absolutely nothing is working out like I wanted!”?

Joseph and Mary headed to Bethlehem. They packed enough for the eighty mile journey, but planned to return to Nazareth and set up their home and carpentry practice. They had barely gotten things set up, when they had to flee, in the middle of the night, to Egypt, as Matthew tells us in his account, in chapter 2, verse 13. Their lives would be filled with unplanned, unmanageable inconvenience.

### **Unmistakable inadequacy**

3. Their lives would also be pressured, I believe, by a third obstacle of unmistakable inadequacy.

If you skip ahead to verse 21 of Luke, chapter 2, we are told of an incident that occurred just days after Christ’s birth. Look at verses 21 through 24.

*And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called*

*Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”*

You need to know that this reveals the deep poverty of Joseph and Mary. There were other things prescribed by the Law to offer to God at this particular dedication. They would certainly have wanted to pull out all of the stops. This Son was the Messiah and they were dedicating Him to Yahweh.

Imagine the irony they felt in their hearts as they dedicated God the Son to God the Father. But, they bought two birds. The Law of Moses indicated that the most prized, most expensive animal that they could have purchased to offer was a young unblemished lamb. They were unable to afford a lamb, however, and had to buy the cheapest animals on the market, which were two common pigeons. This was an indication that they were truly, deeply poor. And how they must have felt their poverty then.

It is interesting to realize though, at this dedication ceremony, they had brought a lamb – the Lamb of God, Emmanuel, God who had come to be with us, to die for us, to take our sins away.

Imagine as well, how inadequate they must have felt raising the Son of God. They were responsible for Jesus Christ’s education in the Old Testament scriptures. They were to teach to Him the stories of the people of God and leaders; such as, Moses and Joshua.

It was probably rather wonderful to teach Jesus the Psalms of David and tell Him that He was the great, great, great-something grandson of David. And, to tell Him the story of Ruth and Boaz and then, inform Him that Ruth was his great, great, great-something grandmother.

Can you imagine how inadequate these two parents felt? There were no books, at that time, on how to raise boys, much less, on how to raise a Messiah.

Can you imagine teaching the prophecies of scripture to the One whom the prophets had foretold? Or, to teach the Law to the One who would never

break the Law; to sing the Messianic psalms to the Messiah?

Their lives were full of unmistakable inadequacy. God said to them, in effect, “I want you to teach the written Word to the One who is the living Word.”

Before we go any further, I want to make one observation: being who you are, where you are, with the challenges you face, and the pressures you have, whether it is in raising your children, or walking with God in the midst of pressure, or trusting God when His will for you is extremely inconvenient, you can learn a lot from these two faithful teenagers. One important lesson to learn is that: *overcoming the obstacles, growing deeper in your faith when tested in your life, does not require previous experience, but personal obedience.*

More than likely, the things that you are facing are things you have never faced before; things that you have no experience in which to fall back on. Life is not like most job applications, where you apply based on experience. Most of the time, God whispers in our hearts, “You’ve never done anything like this before; there’s no time to prepare, just obey Me today; I’ll take care of tomorrow.”

#### **Unfortunate indifference**

4. Another challenge or obstacle surfaced as I studied this text. Joseph and Mary not only experienced unfair indictment, unexpected inconvenience, and unmistakable inadequacy, but unfortunate indifference.

Notice verses 6 and 7 of Luke, chapter 2.

*While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

Some things have not changed. The inn was overcrowded then and the hearts of men are overcrowded today. There is still no room for Him.

Justin Martyr, the second century church leader, stated that the specific birthplace of Jesus was a shallow cave that was used as a shelter for animals. This was a common practice in those days. It is interesting that in the middle of the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine ordered that a church be built over the supposed birthplace of Christ and it was built over and against a Bethlehem cave.

Did Joseph argue with the innkeeper? We have no indication that he did. We are simply told that the inn was full.

I will never forget something that happened a number of years ago, when my twin boys were in the first grade. That September they had not only started first grade, but they had started a new Sunday school class with a new teacher at church too.

It was either the first or second Sunday of the new class that the teacher came to me and introduced herself. She said, "I'm your son's Sunday school teacher. I need to tell you about something that happened this morning."

I said, "You need to tell their mother."

No, I said, "Tell me what happened."

She said, "This morning, after class, your boys were getting ready to run out the door. I reminded them that the rule states that you can't leave the Sunday school class unless a parent comes to pick you up."

They protested, "We always do; we leave right after class."

She said, "Not anymore."

One of them said, "But we do it every Sunday. Our other teachers let us."

She said, "Sorry, but I'm your teacher now and you can't leave."

One of my sons put his hands on his six-year-old hips and said, "Do you know who my father is?"

She did not know, so she said, "No, I don't. Who is he?"

He replied, "Pastor Davey!"

I said to her, "What did you say to him?"

She said, "I just looked back at him, square in the eye, and said, 'I don't care if he is Pastor Davey, you are not leaving this classroom.'"

I said, "Great answer!"

He thought he had the ultimate connection to run the halls; he thought he owned the place.

Jesus Christ owned the world! So, "What do you mean there's no room in the inn?! Do you know who *His* father is?!"

Talk about pulling strings! They could have done it! But that was not the way God had planned it. His plan was the stable.

Whether it was a wooden stable or a cave in a Bethlehem hillside, we need to erase from our minds

the Christmas card picture of fresh hay, clean animals, and a warm fire. In fact, the last thing you would ever do is build a fire in a stable around horses and donkeys.

That cave was dark and cold. The night air was punctuated by Mary's cries of pain. Surrounded by manure and the stench of animals, the ground would have been packed hard by the animals, or, worse yet, muddied by recent rain.

Joseph, I am sure, made a soft place for Mary to lie. Perhaps he used his own cloak. We do not know how long her labor was. Perhaps it lasted well into the night. Perhaps Joseph held her hand; cooled her forehead; tried to encourage her; shooed the animals away. Perhaps he wondered why it was happening like this and did not know exactly what to do.

If you have had a child, then you may remember the uncertainty and fear of that first child. It was all new.

I remember the birth of our twin boys that I mentioned earlier. We were finishing our seminary studies in Dallas at the time. Baylor Hospital was two blocks away. My wife was nine months along and had gone in for her usual checkup, when suddenly, things became rather urgent. They checked my wife into the hospital and, five hours later, she had delivered the babies.

I was called and raced to the hospital. I was told to fill out all of these papers while Marsha was "prepped". There were several forms that I was supposed to read and sign. I signed them, but, for all I know, I signed up for four years in the Marines. Finally, we were in the delivery room and there were people everywhere. There were two or three doctors and some interns. Delivering twins without a C-section was a little different. There were even some medical students there, just to see it happen. I should have sold tickets!

After their birth, we were congratulated. I did not deserve any of it. I called some family members and friends, etc.

I could not help but think of Mary and Joseph. They were two kids. They were out of town and in a smelly, dank stable. This was their first delivery, and there were no nurses, doctors, or interns; no midwife, mother or sister; no friends anywhere to help. They were alone.

The pain and contractions would have increased; the sweat and the fear as well. Luke simply records, in verse 7a,

*And she gave birth to her firstborn son . . .*

This was not her only son, by the way. In Matthew, chapter 13, verse 55, Mary and Joseph's other sons are introduced to us by name. They had four more sons.

However, Jesus was the first born. That meant He had the legal rights of inheritance. His mother and adoptive father were the descendants of King David and therefore, Jesus inherited the right to claim the throne of David. He is the rightful King. But, at this moment in that cave, which reeked of livestock and dirty hay, this baby seemed anything but a King.

One author wrote,

*His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a newborn baby. This is majesty in the midst of the mundane. This is holiness in the filth of manure and sweat. This is deity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager, into the calloused hands of a young carpenter.<sup>i</sup>*

He did not come out with a halo. The animals did not kneel and worship Him. He was an ordinary looking, sounding, feeling baby. And, after Mary swaddled Him; that is, she wrapped Him with strips of cloth, she was too exhausted to even hold Him.

So, they laid their newborn baby in a manger. The Greek word that is used for "manger" is "phatne," which can literally be translated, "feed trough". More than likely, as was the custom, it was

a place cut along the side of the cave and hollowed out. Joseph evidently, cleaned out a section of the trough, as best he could, and put a blanket or some hay into it to cushion the baby. Then he laid, in that feed trough, the Son of God.

You could not have chosen a more wretched place to be born than this. You could not have scripted a more humble, poverty stricken beginning than this one.

What a picture of God's condescension. He entered the world of sin. Perhaps that stable serves as a metaphor of the filth of sinful humanity. He left behind the wealth of heaven and chose the rags of humanity.

He could not have stooped any lower. Emmanuel, "God with us," had come from riches to rags.

*Mary had a little lamb . . .*

*His skin was bronze and smooth;*

*And everywhere that Mary went . . .*

*She pondered in her heart the news,*

*That this was not an accident,*

*some inconvenient incident;*

*No, this was planned since time long past,*

*God's voice, from a manger was heard at last.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/16/2001 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Max Lucado, God Came Near (Portland, OR, Multnomah Press, 1987), p. 23.